

The United States on Monday called on Malaysia to allow freedom of expression and assembly as the government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi widened its crackdown on dissent.

"We have repeatedly raised with Malaysian authorities our belief that citizens of any country should be allowed to peacefully assemble and express their views," department spokeswoman Nancy Beck told AFP.

"We also stated in our annual human rights report our belief that the Malaysian government places significant restrictions on the right to assemble peacefully," she said.

Police permits are required under Malaysia law for public assemblies, defined as a gathering of five or more persons, but the State Department's rights report says senior police officials and political leaders influenced decisions on granting or denying some permits.

It said "a more restrictive policy" was applied with government critics, opposition parties, and human rights activists.

Beck's remarks on Monday came after Kuala Lumpur widened a crackdown on dissent following two mass rallies last month, with three legal actions taken Monday that rights groups and opposition leaders condemned as anti-democratic.

Ahead of elections, dozens of Malaysian government critics have been rounded up and now face trial on counts including attempted murder and sedition.

Abdullah has threatened to invoke draconian internal security laws that allow detention without trial, citing past racial violence in the multicultural nation dominated by Muslim Malays as reason for restricting street protests.

"If the choice is between public safety and public freedom, I do not hesitate to say here that public safety will always win," he said in Kuala Lumpur on Monday.

The United States often hails Malaysia as a moderate Muslim democracy but the image took a knock when a series of indiscriminate destruction of Hindu temples were highlighted by some groups recently.

A US Congress-appointed commission expressed concern last week at the destruction of the temples and other alleged discrimination faced by religious minorities in Malaysia, one of Southeast Asia's more developed economies.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom also urged the administration of President George W. Bush to raise the matter with Kuala Lumpur and "insist that immediate measures be taken to protect sacred sites and prevent further destruction."

The government, which cracked down on two mass rallies last month, took three separate legal actions Monday that rights groups and opposition leaders condemned as anti-democratic.

Among them was a revival of sedition charges against three leaders of ethnic Indian rights group Hindraf, which organised a November anti-discrimination protest that drew 8,000 people. The court had earlier allowed them to walk free on the charges, which carry a penalty of three years in jail.

Lawyers and their supporters were also charged in connection with a human rights march that they mounted in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday which was broken up by police.

Another prominent lawyer, Edmund Bon, was also charged with obstructing a city official who tried to remove protest banners from Malaysia's Bar Council building.

Twelve opposition figures were rounded up over the weekend in connection with an electoral reform rally last month which drew nearly 30,000 people who police dispersed with tear gas and water cannons.